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“Becoming others” valuing our relationship and communication with students

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[AQ1](#)

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a qualitative study of student and lecturer communication and engagement within a ‘safe’ ‘structured’ setting. Relationships between students and academics are part of an emotional as well as intellectual encounter. Our sense of self is profoundly affected by how we feel others think about us. Being heard and valued gives us the confidence to question. Yet within the university context hierarchies and positions easily inhibit this rich potential. The prevalent focus on performativity and individual success can undermine our shared encounters, isolating us so that group work, endemic within university processes becomes, tokenistic and superficial. The study embedded ‘selves’ within a small group setting that facilitated a sense of belonging, open mindedness and compassion towards others by sharing thoughts and experiences. Students and academics exchanged roles and responsibilities. The results suggest that if this type of group work was extended and implemented into the wider university practice, certain concerns about inclusion and equity could be addressed and students and lecturers could enjoy a deeper intellectual and emotional affinity.

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[AQ2](#)

KEYWORDS

Group belonging; emotional affinity; compassion; intellectual non-hierarchical communications

This study was based upon group work with students and academics on an Early Childhood Studies (ECS) course who wanted to reflect on their experience of university and of childhood, and who also shared a belief that working together in a group could be productive. This belief needed to be substantiated and it was necessary to question what sort of group helps us to enjoy learning together, not to assume group work would work. We designed and implemented an ethnographic approach, incorporating the emancipatory paradigm (see Habermas (1973) in Kincheloe and McLaren (1994). Both researchers and participants were engaged in the design and development of the study and initiated ideas and topics. ECS with its focus on early social development presented an opportunity to explore our different childhoods in some depth; to reflect on how we had developed, explore

[AQ3](#)

what mattered to us; bringing our past into a shared present: and then to engage in the specific epistemology of the university; increasing confidence to initiate ideas, question and ultimately care about each other and our shared humanity.

The epistemological focus in universities, though potentially wide-ranging and explorative can be constrained by external influences. Lynch (2010) argues that within universities the artificial separation of emotion from thought exacerbated by the increased managerialism, incessant auditing and measuring, which in turn enforces hierarchical, patriarchal arrangements, as there is less time or incentive to critique the ethos and existential behaviour of the university – rather to focus on ‘efficiencies’, Cartesian rationalism dominates. This focus pre-empts the more creative and implicit development of knowledge and culture through dialogue (Tedlock & Mannheim, 1995).

So although ‘group work’ is utilised within universities, it may not correspond with a culture that promotes individual autonomy. Furthermore, although seminars and lectures herald a shared encounter, an overemphasis on the cognitive can inhibit the affective and social dimensions implicit in communication and learning. Outside these specific learning arrangements, the university does not necessarily foster a culture of shared worlds; opportunities where students and academics are implicitly engaged; hierarchies can dominate (see Bourdieu, 1992). Furthermore, the impersonal academic world may prompt some students to question whether they belong and inhibit their confidence to engage. Privileging the student voice and developing trust is central to increasing confidence (see Baskerville, 2011). Group work in a competitive environment can inhibit those less competitive from emotional engagement or motivation.

The emotional life of learners is implicit in how they relate to each other or whether they identify with each other; our sense of self and how we come to know ourselves is through our relationships with others (see Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1967; Mead, 1913). Harper Lee (1960, p. 308) in her seminal book *To Kill a Mockingbird* writes: ... *You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.* This process of imagining involves an emotional as well as mental engagement. Tahta (1995, p. 3–9) writes that there is an ‘ever-present affectivity’ embedded in the life of learners, therefore both lecturers and students are learners in this context. Correspondingly, Beard, Clegg, and Smith (2007, p. 240) consider that Higher Education pedagogy should allow: ... *exploration, expression and acceptance of emotions and feelings of self and others in ways that contribute to learning.*

The opportunity to engage in this way in part refers to the subject discipline (see Hodgkinson, 2005) and here ECS is only one of several opportunities. The epistemological concern with what sort of knowledge we draw upon and how we develop knowledge is central to university engagement. This epistemological base in turn influences the ontological concern with how we become a member of the university; how we feel about who we are with, and who we are, allows us a passage or alternatively can inhibit our engagement. It is therefore pertinent to examine how group work could facilitate creative self-affirming identification and sense of belonging to the university.

Groups and group work

Various studies highlight the valuable opportunities group work can provide. Williams, Beard, and Rymer (1991) evidence how discussion facilitates the development of knowledge and Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) and Gibbs (1995) sees it as promoting negotiation, communication, respect, empathy and collaboration. Nonetheless to facilitate this opportunity – a sense of equality is also required.

The power imbalance between the tutors and students needs to be considered. Noddings (2003, p, 66–67) argues that without considering the students' perspective a teacher will fail to address the students' needs: *The teacher as one-caring needs to see from both her own perspective and that of the student in order to teach – in order to meet the needs of the student ...* As teachers or lecturers are assessors they hold a position of power; it is crucial that they address the power imbalance by fostering a caring approach towards students and acknowledge that they are themselves learners.

Early Childhood students come to **university** with their own experience of childhood, like us, as ethnographic researchers they have social skills that can enhance understanding different learning experiences and perspectives, developing a depth of learning. Biggs (2003) refers to 'deep learning' as challenging students to think and to question; he argues that is it possible to encourage this through a dialogical approach. This active teaching aims to move students out of their comfort zone into a more challenging zone of engaging with unfamiliar perceptions (Vygotsky, 1986). The conduit for establishing a shared learning practice is language.

Language reflects and creates closeness and distance; power dynamics between people. To develop a shared communication, we change our language, terms like 'we' manifest this change. We belong to each other through language – the 'we' itself goes beyond a concept of the 'me' and 'I' and we create a culture through our shared language. Through sharing our thoughts and beliefs we find out who 'we are'. Seeking the other – creating cultures – developing shared language involves breaking through our sense of difference and fear of the other. Language includes and excludes, defines identity and influences self-belief. Our voice manifests our existence and connection with others: *When we are rendered 'voiceless' through lack of language ... as Blackledge (2000) suggests, we lose our capacity to assert who we are and how we think* (Chanda-Gool & Andrews, 2015, p, 133). It was therefore [AQ4](#) pertinent for us as academics to find a way of enhancing the student voice and enable a greater understanding of each other's thoughts and connections. The methodology we applied emanates from this belief and ambition.

Method and methodological considerations

This study is grounded in the emancipatory paradigm and employed an ethnographic qualitative approach in addressing its objectives. Both researchers and

participants were engaged in the design and development of the study and initiated ideas and topics. Barnes (2004) argues that the emancipatory research paradigm is about the establishment of a workable dialogue between researchers and participants. To do this, researchers must put their knowledge and skills at the disposal of participants. AQ5

As researchers, we participated in all activities that we aimed to explore and consequently sought to become members of the group. This ethnographic approach is characterised by the researcher's immersion in the context. It requires time to observe, listen to and find opportunities to ask questions without disturbing participants' normal behaviour (Bryman, 2012). This ethnographic approach raises various methodological and ethical considerations that we, as researchers, identified and dealt with from day one of the research. For example, setting confidentiality boundaries between and among our participants was key. Anything that was shared through the sessions was to remain confidential and all participants agreed to this. Furthermore, boundaries were set as to what information participants were willing to share. We highlighted to them that they must not share any information that they would not like to share or would make them or others feel uncomfortable. They were also informed that they could withdraw their data at any point, even after data collection has taken place, up to the point of submitting a paper for publication. Overall, the project received ethical approval by the relevant university committee.

As part of the ethnographic methodological approach, two phases of data collection were implemented. First, individual semi-structured interviews with all participants were conducted which resulted in nine interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interviews and generate themes most relevant to the study's objectives. Second, five sessions took place which aimed to raise discussions around these key topics identified below. These sessions were fairly informal and participants were actively involved in setting the agenda as well as managing discussion.

Results and discussion

What the students said provides evidence of increased communication and empathy. The subsections: challenges to be overcome; developing a safe environment and clear structure; becoming others, becoming 'we' and developing emotional affinity, structure this material.

Challenges to be overcome

While some of our findings confirm what is generally agreed to be problematic for successful group work, for example, fear that some members will take more responsibility than others; fear of judgement also indicated lack of confidence.

'... in group work I worry I'll say the wrong thing ...' and sense of trepidation '... It's the unknown ...'

To address these fears it was important to develop positive relational identities (see Milton, 2009) which involved designing a progression of sessions allowing us to become more familiar with how we work; our behaviour and reflections. Milton (2009) describes how identity can be confirmed and affirmed through a group and this in turn affects the way the group develops, reinforces cooperation and inclusion.

... my prime challenge ... where I do have to communicate with people is that I do have quite a severe hearing loss ... it can [also] be quite inconsistent.

Developing a safe environment and clear structure

To ensure a safe environment each session started with a check in to acknowledge the general atmosphere; a small group size helped:

... This helps take the pressure of having to open up and actually made it so much easier to be able to explore a deeper part of yourself ...

Joint decisions about how we accommodated situations such as an occasion when only half the group was able to attend was discussed with those present and a unanimous decision reached to postpone the session so everyone could attend.

As the academics and researchers we were conscious of the power that the students were likely to attribute to us, so we addressed this issue from the start by inviting them to lead the last session and to choose their own subject for presentation (see Laurillard, 2002); this proved to be empowering as long as they felt prepared. It also helped to endorse Light, Cox, and Calkins's (2011) belief that students' participation in research would develop deeper thinking and increased self-awareness. To allay anticipation of possible anxiety one student suggested announcing feelings, for example, saying: 'I just said something and I feel a little unsettled because no one has responded' should the uncertainty arise. Also, as one student put it:

It is an obvious ... to push those – sometimes embarrassing – memories to the back of your mind, but ... others having a similar experience to me made it feel okay to be able to explore my past and speak about personal things in a very enlightening, very safe environment.

Similarities emerged and as participants became more emotionally engaged they also became confident to express differences. The initiative and openness that had evolved was encapsulated in a discussion on normality which the student who led the final session provoked.

Discussion on what is 'normal'

The dialogue below captures the way a student facilitated an exploration of the concept 'normality' and how this in turn developed from a personal evaluation to a sense of empathy, compassion and shared understanding:

S: I want to discuss normality. From my interview with Sofia, I assumed that I had a normal family, and then going further into the interview, I was like, oh, okay, my brother's gay, my sister's got special educational needs, I've been temporarily disabled twice, and my parents are still together but they're full-time foster carers now. We've got two children living in our family; my dad's also got long-term illnesses and stuff. And I just assumed because that, for me, has always been the norm, so I thought that was normal. And like, I just wanted to see what everybody thought about what makes normal 'normal'?

F: Normal should not be normal, there is no normal any more. Everyone is different, and I think everyone has slowly grown to know that. And I think things like racism and like frightening people have been like hard to destroy by society. I think it is important to let everyone know that normal doesn't exist.

D: Normal is 'conforming to a standard or common type; usual, not abnormal, regular, natural ... to establish a standard'

F: So conforming? But what are you conforming against?

C: Exactly. What is conforming?

M: You mean average?

C: Yes, what is average? Who decides what's average?

M: We have this debate quite often in one or two of the modules that I run. But I have to say to myself that there is a normal.

B: Meaning ...?

M: I mean you just have to have some sort of base from which to work. You have to have some sort of concept, some sort of concrete thing that is normal. Because we get very upset when we talk about normal versus sub-normal or abnormal.

N: I think a lot of people put normal and abnormal with majority and minorities. So if someone is -like ... I'm not saying this is correct at all, but people who are gay or lesbian aren't seen as normal because they are seen as the minority against the majority, if that makes sense. So therefore people assume that the minority would be abnormal.

M: Well, I had to write on it recently. I was trying to recently, I was trying to avoid the word 'normal' ...

(laughter)

This personal, philosophical consideration inviting others to share their thoughts produced increased openness on a personal and ethical level:

H: I have a question ... As a child, had you thought about it at all? Had you thought about being a normal child, or not a normal child? Because I thought about it quite a lot when I was a child - this idea of wanting to be normal ...

It became apparent that TVs and material possessions represented the idea of 'normality' but proved to be limited in terms of meaningfulness.

Trying to be 'normal' as discussed above implied a constraint on being ourselves. This awareness prompted two students to disclose their prejudice, as revealed

below, and signified a growing trust within the group which extended to compassion towards others in the wider society. We became part of a shared vulnerability that could be undermined through prejudice.

5 N: I don't know how to say this in a politically correct way – [there is a] person who's on a music course [here] and he was a man, he's now a woman ... but [other students in the library] ... were ... just really being horrible [to her and others]. And I just felt so bad for them [these transgendered], because it doesn't matter who they are, what they look like, they've still got a heart, they've still got feelings ... And yeah, it might not be how we normally perceive people, but if they're happy, why not?

10 Another student responded by revealing self-awareness and exposed susceptibility to become prejudice.

15 F: ... I used to catch the train in ... And I'd never met what you would call a trans-gender ... I have no prejudice regarding lesbians, gays whatsoever. She sat across from me ... with a violin case on the table. And then promptly, as soon as this train moved forward she disappeared, and didn't come back for ages. But the violin case was still sat on the table. My mind went into total overdrive. Crazy, psychopathic cross-gender, very angry with the world, about to bomb me

D: Wow. What we project on people!

B: She trusted you to leave the violin there, in fact

20 C: It shows how wrong you can be

M: So yeah, I mean, I think ... that is the case, I think we spend too much time looking at people and making a judgement about what or who they are

25 This dialogue expressed an openness, desire to confront our own limitations. Through sharing this controversial and sensitive predicament one member in particular spoke out for the group and asserted that it was safe to expose revelations about ourselves that would otherwise remain hidden. It revealed an increased courage and confidence in the group's own acceptance of all members. In turn, this allowed other members of the group more confident to talk about their own vulnerability.

30 One student led her session by exposing how she was adopted and the trauma that she had experienced; she expressed considerable emotion but was held by the care others expressed:

M: I'm so glad you shared that with us

35 C: Yes. It's an amazing story

B: Thank you very much

Another student then corroborated with the experience of adoption.

40 F: Yeah, that's fine. Yeah, I think, obviously hearing your story resonates a lot with me. I was adopted twice ... I did struggle. My mum was an alcoholic since I was 8, and after my mum died I got really upset ... I didn't have any time to think about it and I came straight to Uni...

This self-reflection and awareness required not just the group dynamic but also awareness that disturbing past experiences can remain buried until there is the space and time to raise them to the surface. The space we had established together allowed an exposure of our shared vulnerability and fallibility. One participant
5 was an identical twin and this produced greater self-awareness and insight for the group.

A: ... So personally, we're really, really close, so I really like it, but sometimes there can be negatives to being a twin. Personally like when I was really struggling with low self-esteem and negative body image in secondary school I felt really guilty,
10 because I've got somebody who looks like me and is built like me, and it felt, when I was feeling really bad about my body, I felt really guilty, because it was almost like an extension. Like, I don't think my sister's not beautiful, but I really struggled with that feeling really guilty.

This type of exposure relied upon the trust that had developed in the group and
15 increased confidence ask about pertinent concerns:

I enjoyed the cosy atmosphere in the group and the feeling that I wouldn't get judged ... I also felt that the discussions we had were very enlightening and an interesting look at childhood and how it shapes our lives ... it felt like everyone was equal and we all engaged to the same extent with the topics we covered, and the work that we did, and
20 it also felt like we could be a lot more open about issues that we were having to do with our courses, and other areas of our lives.

Another student highlighted how courage was engendered through these exchanges resulting in greater emotional as well as intellectual confidence:

... I was a shy person [but] ... I showed myself that I do have the courage to open my
25 mind and to be able to share my own opinions on things ... that each one of us has their own experiences ... but all ... had learned from them in their own ways.

Understanding other's perspectives encouraged self-reflection gained through the group dynamics as one student mentioned:

It was a good experience hearing others' views on early childhood ... [it] gave me a
30 chance to reflect on my own childhood and the effect it had on my development into adolescence and adulthood. I don't believe I could have done this without the benefit of group work.

This reflection included a valuable insight in terms of future ambitions:

By exploring my past and how I was as a child and what made me the person I am truly
35 helped me focus on how I want to achieve being a professional. These sessions helped me think how I would do things differently to the children I will teach, or who made a particular impact on me during my younger years, allowing me to apply that to children in my profession.

Therefore, judgements, misconceptions and prejudice were exposed and critiqued,
40 a sense of compassion developed out of great self-awareness. This also increased the sense of trust and empathy; as well as care for someone who has been presenting something emotional:

F: I have a sister with my mum and my dad, which I'll pass round now. And my dad remarried ...

F: Are you alright?

F: Yeah, I think so

And, this may well have developed confidence to express matters of depth and concern openly:

5 I have learnt that I can trust people and now understand that I am not the only person that wants to share ideas and contribute to others professional and personal develop-
ments. I have learnt a lot about my friends that also attended the sessions as I am now
aware that you can be so close to a person but not really listen to them enough for them
10 to be able to open up to you and share something that might be puzzling or bothering
them. I have learnt one main thing about myself and that is why I have barriers up to
communicate when communicating with others, this can be put down to my parents'
divorce and I had not really concluded that it still may have a serious effect on my learn-
ing and why I may not trust certain individuals and wonder if they will leave also.

15 One student aligned a sense of belonging, emanating from being in a family and
extending to this group:

But ... like, at Uni, like now, in a way I see you guys – not as family, that sounds like a very
odd thing to say, but we are close, we do talk, and you know, you're kind of someone
who I can open up to.

20 Transition from family to group work – and from the individual to trust in the group
culminated in a sense of belonging to others.

Becoming others; becoming 'we'

The 'we' emanated from the sense of empathy and a sense of being worthwhile, being heard and therefore becoming more eager to hear. Here, is an example of this use of we:

25 ... Thank you for this opportunity to discuss my childhood in a positive way with people
who care about each other. We have all learnt about ourselves whilst getting to know
others, which has been highly enjoyable.

Another student noted the importance of equality between lecturers and students:

30 I've got lectures with you a few times a week, but you and Chris opened up to us. So the
kind of level of lecturer / student was lost in a good way ... you both opened up to us as
well as us opening up to you ...

To secure this more equal position and respect ethical protocols, as lecturers we had ensured that we would not be marking any of the assignments for any of the participants in this study but pass their work on to colleagues. As one student
35 noted:

We're not being assessed on anything; we're not being marked on anything so it's a lot more free.

This sense of freedom also engendered confidence to engage more effectively as one student noted:

... as a kid, I didn't like group work, because I was always catching up in school, and I felt afraid ... at the beginning of this, I had said that I needed to know each other better so I could open my views on things ... And I think that really happened ... it really helped me to be confident.

5 This in turn endorses Lieberg's (2008) belief that group work can increase active learning, relating to understanding of each other.

And yet another student capitulated on the sense of enjoyment and enthusiasm she experienced:

10 It's been great. I'm so glad that I did it. I've learnt more about myself [and] about everyone ... I've made new friends [and] I think that's an opportunity that's priceless. You know, you pay all this for Uni, but signing up for things like this, I think that's what makes it worthwhile ... I'm grateful for it

This revelation addresses Reay, Davis, David, and Ball's (2005) concern that students could feel ostracised and alienated in the university context.

15 **Conclusion: developing emotional affinity**

This realisation of our differences yet shared humanity; fears, learning and hopes allowed us to break from hierarchical, competitive exchanges and work more closely together. Our emotional/affective exchanges engendered intellectual development so that students became more confident to question – to make mistakes – to play with ideas together and integrate their experiences and lives into the process. The findings also confirm the value of developing a sense of safety and trust, listening more closely at all levels and incorporating that emotional part of ourselves that we would generally assume within an academic context was irrational, not logical and not relevant to our achievements. Transformation of both knowledge and engagement occurred: trepidation was transformed into trust and confidence. Universities with their access to diverse, reflective and creative populations are positioned to develop a vital source of compassion, understanding of difference and a guide for how to integrate diversity into the wider society.

Disclosure statement

30 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

[AQ6](#)

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